

Giovanni Battista TIEPOLO (Venice 1696 - Madrid 1770)

A Study for a Ceiling: A Seated Figure on a Cloud

Pen and brown ink and wash.
186 x 134 mm. (7 3/8 x 5 1/4 in.)

The 19th century Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) aptly noted of the paintings of Giambattista Tiepolo that the artist 'carries his foreshortening from below further than any, so that the soles of the feet and nostrils are the characteristic parts of his figures.' A large number of similarly foreshortened figures - many of whom are seen mainly as pairs of legs – appear, for example, throughout Tiepolo's vast fresco of Apollo and the Continents, painted between 1752 and 1753 on the vault above the staircase of the Residenz at Würzburg.

The same novel approach to viewpoint and perspective is also evident in many of Tiepolo's spirited drawings for ceiling figures, of which the present sheet is a fine example. As has been noted of the drawings from the Sole figure per soffiti albums, 'These sheets depict individual foreshortened figures - ethereal young women, heroic nudes, and warriors – as well as figures that are so sharply foreshortened that only their knees, parts of their heads, and perhaps one or both of their arms can be seen.' The confidence and ingenuity evident in the composition of a drawing such as the present sheet is a feature of Tiepolo's draughtsmanship that has long been esteemed. As Marjorie Cohn has written, 'No student of Tiepolo drawings remains indifferent to their sheer virtuosity. Giambattista, in his wash drawings above all, achieved a new abstraction of illusionism through physical means that were direct, immaculate, and apparently effortless.'

Comparable studies of figures seen from below, characterized by a particular emphasis on the dangling legs of a seated figure, include drawings in the collections of the Albertina in Vienna, the Museo Civico Sartorio in Trieste, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Graphische Sammlung of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, as well as several drawings in the Princeton University Art

Museum.

Provenance:

From an album (or albums) entitled Sole figure per soffiti in the collection of the Conte Algarotti-Corniani, Venice, until c.1852
Edward Cheney, London and Badger Hall, Shropshire
By descent to his brother-in-law, Col. Alfred Capel Cure, Blake Hall, Ongar, Essex
His sale, London, Sotheby's, 29 April 1885, part of lot 1042 (bt. Parsons)
E. Parsons and Sons, London
Anonymous private collection, Ireland
William Fagg, Sydenham
Messrs. B. T. Batsford, London
Their sale, London, Christie's, 14 July 1914, part of lot 49 (bt. Parsons)
E. Parsons and Sons, London, until c.1922-1926
Carlo Broglio, Paris
Adolphe Stein, Paris and Lausanne, in 1975
Mr. and Mrs. George Walker, Banbury.

Exhibitions

London, Adolphe Stein at H. Terry-Engell Gallery, Master Drawings, 1975, no.111; Pfäffikon, Seedam-Kulturzentrum and Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Art Vénitien en Suisse et au Liechtenstein, 1978, no.127; Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Hidden treasures: Works of art from Oxfordshire private collections, 1993, no.57.

Literature:

Mauro Natale, ed., Art Vénitien en Suisse et au Liechtenstein, exhibition catalogue, Pfäffikon and Geneva, 1978, pp.162-163, no.127; Catherine Whistler, Christopher White and Rosemary Baird, Hidden treasures: Works of art from Oxfordshire private collections, exhibition catalogue, Oxford, 1993, no.57, illustrated p.39.

Artist description:

The leading painter in Venice for much of his career, Giambattista Tiepolo was also undoubtedly one of the finest Italian draughtsmen of the 18th century. That his drawings were greatly admired in his lifetime is confirmed by contemporary accounts; indeed, as early as 1732 the writer Vincenzo da Canal remarked that 'engravers and copyists are eager to copy his works, to glean his inventions and extraordinary ideas; his drawings are already so highly esteemed that books of them are sent to the most distant countries'. From the late 1730's until his departure for Spain in 1762, Tiepolo enjoyed his most productive period as a draughtsman, creating a large number of vibrant pen and wash studies that are among the archetypal drawings of the Venetian Settecento. As one recent scholar has commented, 'From the start of his career [Tiepolo] had enjoyed drawing as an additional means of expression, with equally original results. He did not draw simply to make an immediate note of his ideas, nor to make an initial sketch for a painting or to study details; he drew to give the freest, most complete expression to his genius. His drawings can be considered as an autonomous artistic genre; they constitute an enormous part of his work, giving expression to a quite extraordinary excursion of the imagination; in this respect, Tiepolo's graphic work can be compared only with that of Rembrandt.'

Tiepolo's drawings include compositional studies for paintings and prints, drawings of heads, figure studies for large-scale decorations, landscapes and caricatures, as well as several series of drawings on such themes as the Holy Family. Many of these drawings were bound into albums by theme or

subject, and retained by the artist in his studio as a stock of motifs and ideas for use in his own work, or that of his sons and assistants.